THE PINK SHIRT MAN

by Myles Petrovits

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR BEFORE THE NOVEL BEGINS, WHICH IS ITSELF PART OF THE NOVEL, WHICH THE AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGES WITH A SMALL WAVE

The man in the pink shirt does not know he is in a novel.

This is, perhaps, his greatest advantage.

He wakes each morning with the specific and unfounded cheerfulness of a man who has decided, somewhere below the level of conscious thought, that the day is going to be *fine*, that the machinery of the world is basically sound, that the enormous and grinding bureaucratic apparatus which governs all human movement and meaning is, at its core, *trying its best* and deserves our patience and possibly our sympathy.

He is wrong about this.

He does not know he is wrong about this.

This is the novel.

Proceed.

PART 1: THE DEPARTMENT

CHAPTER 1: In Which Our Man Arrives at a Building Whose Purpose is Not Immediately Clear

The building was grey.

Not grey in the way of things that have simply not been painted recently, but grey in the way of things that have *decided* — grey as a philosophy, grey as a position taken after long deliberation, grey as the considered and final aesthetic opinion of a structure that had thought about color and rejected it on principle.

It was eleven stories tall and had no sign.

Edmund Fogg stood before it in his pink shirt — a very particular pink, not the pink of embarrassment or of apology, but the pink of *conviction*, the pink of a man who had stood in a department store three years prior, held the shirt up to the light, and thought: *yes. This is the*

colour of a person who means well. The shirt was laundered and pressed. It was, in all technical respects, an excellent shirt. It glowed, faintly, in the overcast morning like a small portable dawn.

He had received the letter on a Tuesday.

The letter had said, in full:

Dear Mr. Fogg,

Please report to the Department on Thursday at 9 a.m. Bring documentation. The matter is significant.

Regards, The Department

Edmund had read this letter with great interest and then with great care and then with a magnifying glass he did not own until he purchased one specifically for this purpose and found nothing additional through it. He had tried to determine which department. He had three departments in his life: the Department of Motor Vehicles, which had his driver's license on file; the Department of Taxation, which had his returns; and the Department of Buildings, which had once sent him a notice about a crack in the foundation of a building he did not own and had never entered and which he had filed under *Mysteries* in a shoebox under his bed.

He could not determine which department this was.

He had gone anyway.

He was, at his core, a man who showed up. This was his defining characteristic. His mother had said it at his confirmation. His fourth-grade teacher had written it in his report card: *Edmund shows up.* His last employer, who had let him go with the expression of a man releasing a balloon that has simply decided to go in the wrong direction, had said: "Edmund, you always showed up, I'll give you that."

Edmund had said: "Thank you."

He had meant it.

He meant it now, standing before the grey building in his pink shirt at 8:57 a.m. on a Thursday in a city whose name the novel has not yet specified and will not specify, because the city is all cities, which is to say it is no city, which is to say it is the city in your chest that exists between the hours of 3 and 5 a.m. when the machinery hums and the purpose of everything is temporarily unavailable.

He walked in.

He said, to the woman at the desk — who had the face of someone who had been at this desk since before the concept of desks was fully developed and had watched the whole evolution with measured disappointment — he said:

"Good morning! I'm Edmund Fogg. I have an appointment."

The woman looked at him.

She looked at his shirt.

She looked back at him.

"Name," she said.

"Fogg," he said. "Edmund. F-O-G-G. Like weather."

She typed something. She typed it very slowly, with two fingers, in the manner of a person who learned to type before typing was considered a skill and has since refused, on principle, to improve.

"Floor seven," she said.

"Wonderful!" Edmund said, which was perhaps too much, but he said it as he said most things: with complete sincerity and without apology.

He went to the elevator.

The elevator was also grey.

Inside the elevator there was a small placard that read: *THIS ELEVATOR SERVICES FLOORS 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, AND 11 ONLY.*

Edmund pressed 7.

The elevator went to 6.

The doors opened.

Edmund waited.

The doors closed.

The elevator went to 8.

Edmund pressed 7 again, with the gentle patience of a man correcting a small misunderstanding rather than confronting a fundamental system failure.

The elevator opened on floor 8.

A man got in. He was wearing a grey suit and carrying a grey folder and had the expression of a man who had, long ago, made a decision that had seemed reasonable at the time and had been living inside the consequences ever since.

"Seven?" Edmund asked.

The man looked at Edmund's shirt. He looked at it for a long time, the way you look at something that ought not to exist in the place where it exists — a flamingo in a filing cabinet, a sonnet on a tax form.

"Seven doesn't receive on Thursdays," the man said.

"I have an appointment," Edmund said.

"On a Thursday."

"Yes."

"Seven doesn't—"

"Receive, yes, I heard. But the letter said nine a.m. Thursday and I do have it here—" Edmund produced the letter from his breast pocket, where he kept it next to a folded piece of notepaper on which he had written three things he was grateful for that morning, as was his custom, the three things being: *coffee, the smell of rain on concrete, the fact of birds.* He offered the letter.

The man in grey took it. He read it. He turned it over. He read the back, which was blank. He appeared to find the blankness significant.

"This is a form L-7," the man said.

"Is it? I thought it was a letter."

"It has the formatting of an L-7. L-7s go to floor four."

"But it says seven."

"The seven in an L-7 is nominal."

"The seven in the letter is a floor number."

"In your interpretation."

Edmund considered this. He considered it the way he considered most difficult things: with the open and slightly tilted expression of a man who believes that the difficulty has a solution and that the solution is near and that patience is the only tool required to find it.

"Where would you suggest I go?" Edmund asked.

The grey man thought about this with visible discomfort, as though suggestion was a professional risk he had been trained to avoid.

"Four," he said, finally. "Try four."

"Marvelous," Edmund said. "Thank you."

The grey man got out on 3.

Edmund pressed 4.

The elevator went to 4.

Edmund got out.

Floor four smelled of coffee and something older underneath, something institutional, the smell of paper that has been important for a very long time and is beginning to doubt itself.

There was a long corridor. At the end of the corridor there was a door. On the door there was a sign that read: **INTAKE (NOT CURRENTLY INTAKING).**

Edmund walked to the door.

He knocked.

From the other side: silence of a very specific quality, the silence of a room that contains people who have heard the knock and are now, collectively, hoping it will not happen again.

Edmund knocked again. Two knocks, polite, the knock of a man who understands that he is asking something of someone and respects the asking.

The door opened three inches.

An eye appeared.

"We're not intaking," said a voice attached to the eye.

"I have an appointment," Edmund said.

"With Intake?"

"With the Department."

"Which department?"

"The Department," Edmund said. "The letter just said the Department."

The eye disappeared. There was the sound of a brief, hushed consultation whose conclusions were not shared. The eye reappeared.

"Pink shirt," the eye said.

"Yes," Edmund said.

"You're the pink shirt."

Edmund looked down at himself with the brief surprise of a man who has forgotten what he's wearing and then the comfortable recognition of a man who has remembered.

"I am," he said cheerfully. "Is that useful information?"

The door opened fully.

Inside there was an office that contained twelve desks, nine of which were occupied by people of varying ages and uniform grey dress, all of whom were looking at Edmund with the expression of people who have been told that something unusual was coming and had not quite believed it until it walked through the door in a pink shirt and smiled at them.

"Good morning!" Edmund said, to the room.

The room said nothing.

One person, in the back, very quietly, as though the words escaped without permission: "Good morning."

Edmund beamed. He had a very good beam. It was the beam of a man who has decided that warmth is a reasonable response to most situations and has practiced accordingly.

"I'm Edmund Fogg," he said. "I have an appointment. I'm not sure with whom. I received a letter. The letter said floor seven but the gentleman in the elevator indicated floor four. I'm happy to go to seven if that's more appropriate. Or anywhere, really. I brought documentation."

He patted his breast pocket.

A woman in the middle of the room — who had the bearing of someone who did not officially run this office but ran it nonetheless, through the sheer force of being the only person willing to make decisions — stood up.

"Mr. Fogg," she said. "I'm Vera Holt. Sit down. This is going to take a while."

"Wonderful," Edmund said, and sat, and meant it.

CHAPTER 2: In Which the Documentation Proves Insufficient, Then Excessive, Then Possibly Irrelevant

The documentation Edmund had brought was, by any reasonable measure, comprehensive.

He had a birth certificate, a social security card, two forms of photo identification, a lease agreement, three years of tax returns (organized chronologically and also alphabetically by category, in case either ordering was preferable), a letter from his previous employer (the

balloon-releasing man, who had written the letter with the same expression with which he'd released the balloon), two character references from neighbors, one character reference from a woman at his church who was ninety-one and wrote in a hand so ornate it appeared to be calligraphy from another century, a medical record, a copy of his college transcript, a copy of his high school transcript, a library card, a blood type card, a card from a dentist confirming that his teeth were, in the dentist's exact phrasing, *adequate*, and a photograph of himself at age seven standing in front of a house in which he no longer lived, which he had included because the letter had said *documentation* and he had wanted to be thorough.

Vera Holt looked at the photograph.

"What is this?"

"Documentation of my earliest known address," Edmund said helpfully.

"We don't need—" Vera paused. She looked at the photograph again. Edmund at seven was wearing a striped shirt. Even at seven, even in a photograph from 1971, something about the shirt suggested that its wearer intended to be cheerful about things. "We don't need early addresses."

"Of course. My apologies." Edmund's apologies were the apologies of a man who is sorry with his whole chest, sorry genuinely, sorry without reservation, which had the paradoxical effect of making people feel vaguely guilty for having required the apology at all.

Vera looked through the rest of the documentation.

She held up the dentist's card.

"Adequate," she read.

"The dentist is a man of economy," Edmund said.

"We don't need dental."

"Understood."

She sorted the documents into two piles. She examined both piles. She moved three documents from one pile to the other. She examined the piles again. She moved them back.

"The issue," Vera said, "is that we have a record of a Mr. Edmund Fogg that does not match the Edmund Fogg in front of me."

"In what way?"

"The Edmund Fogg in our records," Vera said carefully, "does not exist."

Edmund processed this.

He processed it the way he processed most alarming information: with a brief pause followed by the genuine and effortful search for the silver lining, the way a man scans a cloudy sky not to confirm the clouds but to find the place where the light is getting through.

"I see," he said. "So there's been some kind of clerical—"

"The record is not incomplete," Vera said. "The record is present. It is a full record. It simply indicates that the person described does not exist."

"But I do exist," Edmund said, gesturing at himself with the quiet confidence of a man whose existence he has never previously had cause to question.

"You appear to," Vera agreed. She said this with the tone of someone making a concession that they suspect they will regret. "You appear to exist. You are sitting in that chair, which chairs generally require."

"Generally," one of the men at the back desks muttered, and then appeared to regret it.

"So there is," Edmund said, "a discrepancy."

"There is a discrepancy."

"And the Department sent me a letter to address the discrepancy."

"The Department sent you a letter," Vera said. "Whether it was to address the discrepancy or to document the discrepancy or to inaugurate a formal inquiry into the discrepancy or simply to inform you of the discrepancy for informational purposes is—" she looked at the letter— "not specified."

"The letter says the matter is significant," Edmund pointed out.

"The matter is significant."

"But the nature of the significance is not specified."

"Correct."

Edmund nodded slowly. He nodded the way a man nods when he is trying to find the shape of the problem before he finds the solution, like pressing the outside of a wrapped box to determine what's inside before unwrapping it.

"Well," he said, with the tone of a man settling into a project, "where do we begin?"

Vera looked at him.

She had worked in this office for seventeen years. She had processed the documentation of seven hundred and forty-three individuals who had received letters from the Department

regarding discrepancies. Of those seven hundred and forty-three individuals, the responses upon learning of their discrepancy had included: weeping (most common), rage (second most common), a kind of stunned and flattening despair (third), attempted departure before the paperwork was complete (frequent), philosophical resignation (rare), and once — once, in 1991 — a man who had laughed until he had to sit down.

Not one of them had said *where do we begin* in the tone of a man rolling up his sleeves.

She looked at his shirt.

"Form 9-C," she said. "You'll need to fill out a Form 9-C."

"Excellent," Edmund said. "Is there a pen I can borrow? I've brought my own but I'm happy to use yours if that's procedurally preferable."

Vera Holt sat back down at her desk and did not smile, because smiling was not something she did at work, had not done at work in many years, had in fact conducted a quiet personal policy against workplace smiling on the grounds that it created expectations she was not prepared to sustain.

She handed him a pen.

She may have, very briefly, almost smiled.

The record will reflect that she did not.

CHAPTER 3: In Which Form 9-C Leads to Form 9-C (Supplemental) Which Leads to a Room With No Windows and a Plant That is Doing Its Best

Form 9-C was four pages long and asked, among other things:

Please describe, in the space provided, the nature of your existence. (If additional space is required, use Form 9-C Appendix B, available on Floor 2, Window 4, between the hours of 10 a.m. and 10:15 a.m., Tuesdays only.)

Edmund described his existence. He described it carefully and with affection: the apartment on Birch Street, the job (former) at the records office, the Tuesday habit of buying a newspaper and not finishing it, the window that faced east which meant mornings were good, the coffee ritual, the evening walk, the general and abiding sense that life was — not easy, certainly not easy, but *interesting*, sufficiently interesting to warrant continued participation, yes, on balance, yes.

He ran out of space.

He asked about Form 9-C Appendix B.

It was a Wednesday.

Appendix B was unavailable on Wednesdays.

He was given, instead, Form 9-C (Supplemental), which was eight pages long and began:

If you have been referred to this form from Form 9-C, please explain, in the space provided, why the space provided on Form 9-C was insufficient. Note: if your explanation exceeds the space provided on this form, please do not request Form 9-C (Supplemental) Supplemental, as this form does not exist.

Edmund thought about this.

He thought about it with the specific and pleasurable concentration that he brought to all puzzles, which was the concentration of a man who trusts that the puzzle has an answer and that the answer will, when found, be interesting.

He wrote: *My existence is sufficiently extensive that four pages proved inadequate. I have done my best to be concise. The difficulty is that existence, when examined closely, turns out to contain more than one initially estimates. I suspect this is common.*

He submitted both forms.

He was directed to Room 4-G.

Room 4-G was a small room with no windows and a table and two chairs and a plant in the corner that was improbably alive given the conditions.

Edmund sat in one of the chairs.

He looked at the plant.

The plant was a pothos. It had been allowed to grow in whatever direction it preferred, which had resulted in an asymmetrical and slightly anarchic sprawl that somehow, against all horticultural odds, looked vigorous. It was doing what it could with what it had.

Edmund appreciated this.

"Good morning," he said to the plant.

The plant did not respond, being a plant, but seemed, in the particular way of plants that are doing their best in difficult circumstances, to acknowledge the greeting.

Twenty minutes passed.

Edmund was not bothered by waiting. He had brought, in his jacket pocket, a small notebook — the kind with a red cover, bought from a drugstore — and he wrote in it while he waited. He

wrote observations. He wrote the number of ceiling tiles (forty-two). He wrote the species of the plant and a brief description of its apparent health (good, remarkably). He wrote the quality of the light, which came from a fluorescent fixture that hummed at a frequency just below the threshold of annoyance and which Edmund described as *persistently attempting.*

A man came in.

He was thin and wore glasses and had the air of a man who had been handed a file he had not asked for and was now required to address its contents while also performing every other duty of his day.

"Mr. Fogg."

"Good morning!"

The man sat down. He opened the file. He read it. He closed it. He opened it again.

"You've filled out your 9-C," the man said.

"And the Supplemental," Edmund confirmed.

"You've stated that your existence is extensive."

"I've tried to be accurate."

"Mr. Fogg." The man took off his glasses and held them. This was, Edmund recognized, the gesture of a man who is about to say something he has not entirely worked out yet and needs his hands free for the uncertainty. "Are you aware of the nature of the discrepancy in your record?"

"I'm not," Edmund said. "I was told I don't exist."

"According to the record."

"According to the record, yes. Though I'd gently suggest that the record may be the thing in need of revision, rather than my existence."

The man put his glasses back on.

He looked at Edmund's shirt.

"Is that pink?" he asked.

"Yes," Edmund said.

"It's very pink."

"I find it clarifying," Edmund said. "It's hard to be ambiguous in a pink shirt. You make a commitment."

The man looked at the shirt for another moment. He appeared to be thinking something that he had no professional framework for.

"The discrepancy," the man said, returning to the file, "is that our records indicate an Edmund Fogg who applied for registration with the Department in 1987, completed forms R-4 through R-9, and was subsequently registered as an existing person in good standing."

"That sounds right," Edmund said. "I do exist. I have existed since—"

"In 1994," the man continued, "an administrative review was conducted of all registrations between 1985 and 1990. During the review, your file was flagged."

"Flagged for what?"

The man looked at the file. He looked at it for a long time.

"It doesn't specify," he said.

"The flag doesn't indicate what it's flagging?"

"The flag indicates that a flag has been placed. The nature of the flag is noted in the secondary documentation."

"And the secondary documentation?"

"Was filed separately."

"And where is it filed?"

The man closed the file.

"We don't know," he said, with the flat and weary honesty of a man who has stopped trying to make this sound better than it is.

Edmund absorbed this.

He looked at the plant.

The plant continued doing its best.

"Well," Edmund said. "We'll find it. Won't we? We'll find the secondary documentation and we'll see what the flag is flagging and we'll sort it out." He smiled. He smiled the way people smile when they believe, without sufficient evidence, that things will be sorted out, and the smile was so complete and so free of irony that the thin man felt something shift in his chest, something

small and structural, like a nail that has been loosely seated for years finally deciding to either go in or come out.

"It could take time," the thin man said. "These things—"

"I have time," Edmund said. "I've nowhere to be. The day is—" he glanced at the wall, which had no window— "I believe the day is still going. Shall we look for the file?"

The thin man — whose name was Bernard, though no one in the office called him that, they called him B, had called him B for eleven years, and he had stopped correcting them the way you stop correcting things that are so thoroughly wrong that correcting them would require rebuilding something from the foundation — Bernard stood up.

"I'll need to request the secondary request form," Bernard said.

"Of course."

"The secondary request form authorizes a search for secondary documentation."

"Naturally."

"The form takes three to five business days."

Edmund smiled. "I'll wait."

Bernard looked at the plant.

He looked at Edmund.

He looked at the shirt.

He sat back down.

He picked up the phone on the table and called a number from memory.

"Greta," he said. "It's B. I need a secondary request form." A pause. "I know it's Thursday." Another pause. "No, I know. But—" A longer pause. "He's still here." A pause. "Pink." A very long pause. "Yes. That pink. Could you just—" He listened. "Thank you, Greta."

He hung up.

"She'll bring it up," he said.

"Wonderful," Edmund said.

"It'll still take three to five days."

"That's all right," Edmund said. "Do you have any more of that coffee I smelled on the way in? I'd love a cup. And perhaps you could tell me about the plant. Someone's been caring for it. It's in remarkable shape for a windowless room."

Bernard looked at the plant.

"I water it," he said, with the defensive tone of a man admitting to something tender.

"It shows," Edmund said warmly. "It really shows."

PART 2: THE CITY DURING

CHAPTER 4: In Which Edmund Waits Three to Five Business Days and Notices Things

He was not required to remain in the building during the three to five business days.

This was clarified by Vera Holt on his way out, in the manner of someone clarifying something they expect to have to clarify more than once.

"You may leave," she said. "We have your information."

"My non-existent information," Edmund said pleasantly.

"Your filed information," Vera corrected.

"Of course." He buttoned his coat. Outside the grey building the city was doing its afternoon thing, which was everything simultaneously. "If anything is needed from me—"

"We have your number."

"The number in the file."

"Yes."

"Of the man who doesn't exist."

"Mr. Fogg."

"I'm joking," Edmund said. "Poorly, perhaps. I apologize. Good afternoon, Ms. Holt. Thank you for the 9-C. And for the pen."

He put the pen on her desk.

He had his own.

He went out.

The city received him the way the city receives everyone: without ceremony, without orientation, with the immediate and total assumption that he knew where he was going.

He did not know where he was going.

He walked.

He walked past a bakery that smelled of cinnamon and something deeper, some base-note warmth that the bread made in collaboration with the yeast which made it in collaboration with time. He stopped. He went in. He bought a roll for reasons he did not examine. He ate it standing on the pavement with the contentment of a man eating bread outside on an autumn afternoon, which is one of the purest contentments available to the human animal, if the human animal will let itself feel it.

He walked past a hardware store where a man was arranging nuts and bolts in a tray with the meticulous pleasure of a curator arranging artifacts, each bolt in its row, each row parallel to the last, the whole tray an argument for order that was also, somehow, an argument for the beauty of small necessary things. Edmund watched for a moment through the window. The man did not notice. He was entirely in his work.

Entirely in his work, Edmund wrote in the red notebook.

He walked past a laundromat in whose window a child had pressed their face against the glass to watch the clothes turning in the drum, and the face was full of the uncomplicated wonder of watching a thing go around, the pure sufficient pleasure of the cycle, the sock and the sheet and the sock again.

The cycle, he wrote. *The sock again.*

He found a bench.

He sat.

He was, he understood, engaged in something that could be called waiting but felt more like attending. Attending to the city. Being present in it without agenda while the machinery of the Department processed his non-existence. He was, in the formal sense, a man without a file. A man between bureaucratic states.

He found this relaxing.

This alarmed him, slightly, and then he decided not to be alarmed and that was that.

He wrote in the notebook for a while. He wrote about the Building, the letter, Vera Holt and the almost-smile, Bernard and the plant, the elevator that went to the wrong floor with a sincerity that suggested it had simply formed a different opinion about where he needed to be.

He wrote: *What if the building is right? What if I am on the wrong floor, perpetually, and this is not a malfunction but a diagnosis?*

He thought about this.

He wrote: *No. The building is wrong. I pressed 7. I meant 7. 7 is 7. I am on the right floor. The building will catch up.*

He closed the notebook.

He looked at the sky.

The sky was doing the thing it does in autumn in cities, which is to say it was producing light of a quality that has no name but that painters spend whole careers chasing and occasionally catch: low and gold and slightly elegiac, the light of a day that knows it's going.

Edmund sat in it.

He was not anxious.

This, he thought, was either a character strength or a cognitive failure, and he had decided, a long time ago, to call it the former.

CHAPTER 5: The Other People in the Waiting Room (He Goes Back on Day Two)

On the second day Edmund returned to the Department, not because he had been summoned but because he had thought of a question and felt it would be better to ask it in person.

The question was: *Is the secondary request form a form I should be filling out, or a form the Department fills out on my behalf?*

He felt this was a reasonable and clarifying question. He felt it could save time.

In the waiting room on Floor 4 — to which he now went directly, having determined that the elevator, if spoken to calmly and without confrontation, would deliver him approximately where he intended — there were four other people.

The first was a woman of about sixty who sat with the furious stillness of a woman who has been still for so long that the stillness has become its own form of action. She had a folder on her lap sealed with a rubber band. She had been there, Edmund guessed, since before he arrived, and would be there after he left, and was not at peace about this.

The second was a young man — early twenties, Edmund thought — who had fallen asleep in the plastic chair with his head tipped back and his mouth slightly open and who was sleeping

with the profound commitment of someone who has made a decision about unconsciousness and intends to see it through.

The third was a man in a suit who was making notes on a yellow pad with the rapid efficiency of a man for whom time is money, which meant every minute in this waiting room was costing him something, which you could see in the set of his jaw, which was the jaw of a man being robbed very slowly and unable to identify the robber.

The fourth was a small boy, perhaps eight, sitting next to a woman who was presumably his mother and who was filling out a form with the focused determination of a woman who will get this done if it kills her. The boy was looking at Edmund.

Specifically, the boy was looking at Edmund's shirt.

Edmund smiled at the boy.

The boy said: "Why is your shirt pink?"

Edmund considered the question with the seriousness it deserved.

"Because I like it," he said.

"My friend Marcus says pink is for girls," the boy said. He said this not as a challenge but as information he was sharing to see what Edmund would do with it.

"Marcus is wrong," Edmund said pleasantly. "Pink is for people who like pink. Do you like pink?"

The boy thought about this. "I like red," he said.

"Red is excellent," Edmund said. "Red is pink with more opinions."

The boy looked at his mother. His mother had not looked up from the form. The boy looked back at Edmund.

"Are you in trouble?" the boy asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Edmund said. "The Department has a record that says I don't exist."

"But you do exist," the boy said.

"I do."

"So the record is wrong."

"Apparently."

"Can't you just tell them?"

Edmund smiled. "That's what I'm doing."

"How long does it take?"

"Three to five business days for the secondary request form. Then—" he made a gesture that encompassed the size and complexity of the process, which was a large gesture, requiring significant arm movement— "we'll see."

The boy absorbed this.

"My mum's been coming here for six weeks," he said.

"Oh," Edmund said.

"About my birth certificate. They lost it."

"That must be—"

"She cries sometimes in the car after," the boy said. Not with drama. With the matter-of-fact accuracy of a child reporting observable data.

Edmund looked at the boy's mother. She was still filling out the form. She had the posture of someone who has cried in the car after and is not going to cry here, has made a specific and daily decision not to cry here, is holding that decision together with the same effort she is using to fill out the form.

"She'll sort it out," Edmund said.

"How do you know?"

"Because she keeps coming back," Edmund said. "That's the whole of it, really. You keep coming back."

The boy looked at this information from several angles.

"Is your shirt actually pink?" he said. "Or is it like, salmon?"

"It is," Edmund said firmly, "extremely pink."

The boy seemed satisfied.

From across the room, the woman with the furious stillness looked at Edmund's shirt. Something in her face shifted — not warmth exactly, but the temporary suspension of its opposite. She said nothing. She looked away. She looked back at the door to the inner offices.

She kept her rubber-banded folder on her lap.

She kept coming back.

PART 3: THE FINDING

CHAPTER 6: In Which the Secondary Documentation is Located, and What It Contains

On the fourth business day — a Wednesday, so technically the fifth day — Bernard called.

"Mr. Fogg."

"Bernard! Good morning. How's the plant?"

A pause. "The plant is fine."

"Glad to hear it. Have you found the—"

"We found the secondary documentation."

Edmund sat down. He sat down in the specific way of a man for whom standing has suddenly become optional. He was at his kitchen table, which was a small table next to a window that faced east, and the morning light was doing its considerable best.

"Wonderful," he said. "What does it say?"

Another pause. A longer one. The pause of a man reading something and deciding how to read it aloud.

"The flag on your file," Bernard said, "was placed in 1994 by a Mr. — it's hard to read the signature — possibly Harwick, possibly Hartwick — who noted that your registration was incomplete."

"Incomplete how?"

"You had filed, in 1987, forms R-4 through R-9."

"As you said."

"Form R-6," Bernard said, "was the form on which you were required to attest to your continued intention to exist."

Edmund blinked.

"I'm sorry?"

"Form R-6 is the Intention to Continue Existing form. It asks registrants to confirm that they intend to continue existing within the Department's jurisdiction for the foreseeable future."

"And I filled it out?"

"You filled out an R-6, yes. But the R-6 you filed was the 1986 version of the form. In January 1987, the R-6 was updated to the R-6 Revised. The revised form added a second attestation — a checkbox — in the bottom right corner of page two."

Edmund waited.

"The checkbox," Bernard said, "was labeled: *I am, to the best of my knowledge, real.*"

Silence.

"You did not check it," Bernard said.

Edmund sat with this.

He sat with it the way you sit with things that are so precisely absurd that they have crossed back over into a kind of sense, the way the view from a great height is so vertiginous it becomes peaceful.

"I didn't check a box," Edmund said.

"You did not check the box."

"The box that asked if I was real."

"The box that asked you to attest, to the best of your knowledge, to your reality. Yes."

"And because I didn't check it—"

"The system could not confirm your existence. The flag was placed. The record was marked as unverified. Over time the unverified record was, in a 1998 consolidation, reclassified as—"

"Non-existent."

"Non-existent."

Edmund looked at the morning light on his kitchen table.

He picked up his pen.

"If I were to," he said slowly, "check the box. Now. Retroactively."

"There is a form for retroactive attestation."

"Of course there is."

"It's a short form," Bernard said. And there was something in his voice — a frequency just below the professional register — that suggested Bernard had looked at this form and found it short enough to be almost funny and had decided not to say so until now. "It's essentially just the checkbox."

"One checkbox."

"One checkbox."

"I'll come in," Edmund said.

"I'll have the form ready."

"Bernard."

"Yes."

"How's Greta? Did she mind the form on a Thursday?"

A pause of a different quality than the others: a pause that contains, Edmund thought, the exact size and shape of the answer but cannot deliver it within professional parameters.

"She's fine," Bernard said. "She says the plant on your level died last winter."

"Which level?"

"Seven."

"Ah. Well. Perhaps I should have gone to seven after all."

"Perhaps," Bernard said. "I'll see you shortly, Mr. Fogg."

"See you shortly, Bernard. Is there anything I can bring? I have a cinnamon roll from the bakery on—"

"We're not supposed to accept—"

"Of course. I'll eat it on the way."

He did.

CHAPTER 7: In Which Edmund Checks the Box

The form was, as Bernard had indicated, short.

It was a single page. It had Edmund's name at the top — printed, correctly, as FOGG, EDMUND W. (the W stood for Wallace, which was his grandfather's name and which Edmund had always kept quietly, as a kind of private inheritance) — and below it a single sentence:

I, the undersigned, attest that I am, to the best of my knowledge, real, and that my continued existence is intentional.

Below the sentence: a checkbox.

Below the checkbox: a signature line.

Below the signature line: a date line.

That was the form.

Edmund read it twice.

He read it the way you read something short that contains something large — the way you read the last line of a poem that has been building to it, the way you read a telegram with news you've been waiting for. He read it with the full and quiet attention of a man who understands that some small boxes are not small.

He picked up the pen.

He checked the box.

I am, to the best of my knowledge, real.

He signed.

He dated it.

He put the pen down.

He slid the form across to Bernard, who was watching him with the expression of a man who has processed seven hundred and forty-four of these now, and not one of them has been like this one, and he is not sure what to do with that fact, and he suspects he will think about it later, at home, at the table where he eats dinner alone, in the apartment where the only plant is the one at work, which is doing well, which is doing remarkably well, all things considered.

Bernard took the form.

He stamped it.

He filed it.

He picked up the phone and called Greta and said three numbers Edmund didn't understand and Greta said something back and Bernard said: *yes, effective immediately* and hung up.

"You exist," Bernard said. "Officially."

"I've been existing unofficially this whole time," Edmund said.

"Officially, though."

"Officially," Edmund agreed. "Is there a certificate? A letter? Something I can keep? Not that I need the validation — I've been reasonably confident about my existence throughout — but it seems like the sort of thing that ought to have a document."

Bernard opened a drawer. He produced an envelope. He slid it across.

Edmund opened it.

Inside was a card. White card, official seal in the corner, and printed on it:

DEPARTMENT OF REGISTRATIONS AND RECORDS This certifies that FOGG, EDMUND W. has been confirmed as existing. Date of confirmation: [stamped] Status: REAL

Edmund looked at the card for a long time.

"Thank you," he said. He said it simply, without performance, the way you thank someone for something that cost them nothing but mattered anyway.

"There's one more thing," Bernard said.

Edmund looked up.

"The checkbox," Bernard said. He was not looking at the file now. He was looking at the surface of the desk, in the manner of a man looking at the desk to avoid looking at the other thing he is about to say. "It was added to the form in 1987. The revised R-6. The checkbox that says — you know what it says."

"I am real," Edmund said.

"Yes." Bernard tapped the desk once with his finger, a single tap, like a period. "We've processed, in this office, since 1987, approximately four thousand attestations. Four thousand people who checked that box." He looked up. "You're the first one who checked it without hesitation."

Edmund considered this.

"Is that unusual?" he asked.

"Most people," Bernard said carefully, "pause. Some people ask what happens if they don't check it. Some people ask us to define *real*. Some people ask us to define *knowledge*. Some people—" he paused— "don't check it at all. They leave it blank. We have a sub-form for that."

Edmund looked at the wall where the window was not.

"I didn't think to pause," he said. "I'm real. I know I'm real. I've been — I've been *here*, the whole time. Eating rolls and looking at pigeons and taking notes on the quality of the light. I've been here."

"Yes," Bernard said.

"The box seemed easy."

"For you," Bernard said. "Yes."

Edmund looked at the card in his hand.

Status: REAL.

He looked at Bernard.

"The plant looks good," he said.

Bernard looked at the plant.

"I've had it since 1999," he said. "Bought it for a room with a window. Then the room changed." He looked at it with the expression of a man assessing a decision he cannot reverse and has decided to make the best of. "It adapted."

"It did," Edmund said.

He stood. He put the card in his breast pocket, next to the folded paper with the three things he was grateful for. He buttoned his coat.

"Same time next year?" he asked.

"The attestation is a one-time requirement," Bernard said. "Unless there's another flag."

"And will there be?"

Bernard thought about the four thousand people who had paused, who had asked for definitions, who had left the box blank.

"Probably not," he said.

EPILOGUE: THE SHIRT, AGAIN

Edmund Fogg walked out of the grey building into the afternoon.

The city received him the same way it always did: without ceremony, without orientation, with the immediate and total assumption that he knew where he was going.

He did not know where he was going.

He walked.

He put his hand in his breast pocket and felt the card and the folded paper and he thought about the small boy and his mother and the rubber-banded folder and the woman with the furious stillness and Bernard who watered the plant and Vera Holt who had almost smiled, who *had* smiled, who had smiled in the private dark behind the professional face where smiles are kept for later.

He thought about four thousand people who had paused before checking the box.

He understood the pause.

He had simply — and he knew this about himself, had always known it, it was perhaps the thing he knew most reliably — he had simply decided, at some point so early he couldn't find it in his memory, that the answer was yes. That the living was intentional. That the showing up was the thing, the whole of the thing, the sufficient and entire thing.

He would not always be right about this.

There would be days when the grey of the building got inside him. Days when the elevator went to the wrong floor and didn't correct itself. Days when the documentation was insufficient and the window faced the wrong direction and the light was the light of a day that had given up on itself before noon.

He knew this.

He walked past the bakery.

He bought another roll.

He stood on the pavement in his pink shirt in the autumn afternoon and ate it and looked up at the city going about its enormous and indifferent business, all its ten thousand urgent private errands, all its flags and forms and secondary documentation and sub-forms for the blank boxes, all its Bernard's watering plants in windowless rooms and boys watching laundry turn and women with rubber bands around the evidence of their children's existence.

The city.

Which did not know him.

Which did not need to.

He was, as of this afternoon, officially and documentably real.

Status: REAL.

He finished the roll.

He put the paper bag in the bin with the specific care of a man who believes that small right actions matter, even when no one is watching, *especially* when no one is watching.

He took out the red notebook.

He wrote:

Today I checked a box that said: I am real. It was the easiest thing I have done in a long time. I do not know if this means I am brave or simply that I have been, all along, more certain than I knew. Either way. Checked. Done. Official.

The plant on Floor 4 is thriving. Bernard waters it. It has never had a window. It is doing remarkably.

Tomorrow: unknown. But the shirt is clean and the morning faces east and the cinnamon rolls at the bakery on this street are, without question, worth returning for.

Sufficient. More than sufficient.

More than enough.

He closed the notebook.

He walked.

He was, to the best of his knowledge, real.

The shirt was very pink.

The afternoon was very afternoon.

The city had no opinion about any of this.

He loved it anyway.

FIN.